

Lost on the Farm
John 4:46-54
for Westminster Presbyterian Church
29 July 2018

Our text today comes from the Gospel of John, chapter four, verses 46-54. Listen for the Word of God.

⁴⁶Then he came again to Cana in Galilee where he had changed the water into wine. Now there was a royal official whose son lay ill in Capernaum. ⁴⁷When he heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went and begged him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. ⁴⁸Then Jesus said to him, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.” ⁴⁹The official said to him, “Sir, come down before my little boy dies.” ⁵⁰Jesus said to him, “Go; your son will live.” The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way. ⁵¹As he was going down, his slaves met him and told him that his child was alive. ⁵²So he asked them the hour when he began to recover, and they said to him, “Yesterday at one in the afternoon the fever left him.” ⁵³The father realized that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, “Your son will live.” So he himself believed, along with his whole household. ⁵⁴Now this was the second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee.

The Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Let us pray: Guide us, O God, by your Word & Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

In my memory my Grandfather’s farm covered an expanse from magical Due West, South Carolina up through the hills and hollers of Abbeville County all the way to the Georgia-North Carolina line. Behind the little farm house were hundreds of acres, those closest to the house carefully plowed to make room for the grazing cows and grandchildren. As the hills unfolded so too the shrubs, forming a line of defense to protect the donkeys and the chicken houses. Then back beyond that, well beyond the sight-lines of the house, things got wild. You may make a turn and come upon a pond, perfectly situated on a hill. Or you’d cross a rickety bridge and find yourself in a thicket—in the depths of a dark wood canopied by cicadas calling from their high perches and wild turkeys wobbling through the brush.

When I was small I would hop the fence that separated the house from the farm and run wild among the grazing cows. As I grew older I became bolder in my wanderings, exploring old storehouses near the pond that even then were well forgotten. And then one day as evening began to set in I headed for the forest.

You can trace your steps in the forest, leave a trail of rocks or crumbs, but as you move deeper into the thicket, turn more corners to get a better glimpse of what's around you, you may realize that you are lost. In the mind of a 10-year-old it doesn't take much for an adventure to become a terror. Every crackle of the brush set me on edge, the distant summer thunder echoing danger: I was certain that creatures enclosed the little patch of land, circling me as I circled the wooded interior; certain that the swaths of sand were quick, would grab my ankles and pull me under; certain, as only a child can be, that I was forever lost.

Fear narrows your vision, shortens your breath. All I saw was the thicket. Dark and deep, cutting off light, the warm hearth of home.

I imagine sometimes that grief is like that thicket. It pulls you into its depths, cuts off your oxygen, dims your vision. It focuses your thoughts on the one thing you'd like most to forget: that something is terribly wrong, that you are lost, that the world looks smaller, less lovely, more constricting from within the forest depths.

The tone of today's text seems almost antiseptic compared with its action. But it does not take much imaginative work to set yourself in the scene. A boy is sick, sick to the point of death, and his father is desperate.

What we read in our preacher's drawl would have sounded far more like the cries of parents at the border these past months: stricken, living grief born out of fear, and a palpable sense that all is lost.

People heard that Jesus was doing wondrous things. And here he was, back in Cana — the place of his very first sign, the sign of abundance and life, the sign of a great party: wells of water turned into jugs of the finest wine. I imagine Jesus was encroached from all sides, certainly someone else had run out of wine, someone needed some magic for their next soiree; but it was the voice of a royal official that rose above the rest.

It's one thing to need a drink. It's another to need the breath of life.

In the heart of Cana a man is trapped in the woods.

Despite its dubious beginnings, this is a beautiful little story. But it feels alienating to me. What relief the royal official must have felt, relief that has transformed joy to deep belief for himself and his entire household. The grief I understand. And certainly the joy. It's the miracle bugs me.

And I don't think I'm the only one. I find that in general we in the church have a strained relationship with miracles. On the one hand we seem aware of the utter contingency of it all—the *could've gone another way* in our lives. In that scheme everything is a miracle: from a front row parking spot to the food on our tables, the pills we swallow, and the air we breathe.

But then again we are a reasonable people. The parking space is coincidence, a bit of good luck. The food is the result of the hard labor of a farmer, and the mercy of a sky full of rain. The pills are the work of science, and the air a gift of the earth itself, of God's big bang, a natural occurrence without which we wouldn't have minds to reflect.

There's difficulty inherent in that tension—recognizing contingency, intervention, blessing, and explaining it all away. So from our pulpits and in our teaching we go the easier route: we ignore these stories as instructive for our faith. The age of miracles is over, we now live in reality.

And who can really blame us? After all the miracles, when they really count, never do seem to find us. When life is needed another glass of wine will not do. The thicket of grief has its way, traps us in, constricts our breathing, narrows our vision. Many in this congregation know it all too well—a child not healed, the end of the road for a treatment, a broken relationship unable to be mended. We understand the grief of the royal official

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but we're still waiting for our miracle.

Lost in the forest I tried to climb a tree to get an arial view, to find my way out of the mire. But I picked a young tree with limbs not two inches thick. They immediately broke, and all of my efforts to run *up* the tree ended with me on my back. I was left to wait.

The Gospel of John is unique in the way it deals with what we call “miracles.” Each of Jesus’ seven transformative acts in the Gospel is labeled a “sign.” And each sign is meant to be just that—to point beyond the initial action to some more profound truth. In encountering Jesus’ signs we learn something of who Jesus is and by extension what God’s will might be for our lives.

Jesus seems concerned in both Cana miracles that those around him will be so consumed by the sign that they’ll miss the thing signified. They’ll drink all the wine and forget the wide open welcome at the party, the child will live and they’ll miss the universal call to life.

Through that lens we better understand Jesus’ seeming rebuke of the grieving father, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.” It’s in the second person plural, which is why we need a Southern translation of the Bible, addressed to the entire crowd: unless *y’all* see signs, *y’all* will not believe. In his grief, though, the father persists. He begs Jesus’ presence—*come down*, lay your hands on him, feel his chest, give him breath.

Jesus acquiesces — partly. He will not go. He will not lay on hands. He does not even meet the boy. But he grants a word. The NRSV does a disservice to the original Greek text here. Responding to the man Jesus utters one simple Greek word, critically a word in the present tense: *ZE*, “*he lives*.” Not in the unknown future, “he will live,” as the NRSV translates it, not by the time you get home, not later today. The boy lives. Now.

And this is my favorite part of the story, the part that seems most astounding, most miraculous: the father, desperate and grieving, believes and he departs. It must have been the longest walk of his life, and it is perhaps *the* miracle in the story. The unnamed royal official follows Jesus by departing him. He hears the call to life. And without proof, without confirmation, he goes with God’s word.

Dusk came, then dark. In my memory I spent hours trapped in the forest. The truth is that I left after supper and was in bed by midnight, but I was certain I’d never find my way back home, that I’d never be found.

Until I head a voice, my name echoing among the trees. The woods were thick, obscuring my vision. I could not see my grandfather. All I could do was follow his voice.

Follow and follow and follow until I saw the blinking junk drawer flashlight. But it was the sound called me out of the thick. I'd a hole in my elbow, a scratch from a tussle with the tree, but I was free.

The long walk home is the heart of the royal official's story, what makes it relevant to us today: the official follows God's word into an unknown future. We, at our best, do too. Jesus' call echos, penetrates all our darkness, moves us toward life *even in our grief, even in death, even in the darkness of a tomb.*

We see in this story what John first proclaimed in his prologue, used this morning in our call to worship. Where Jesus is, in body or by the power of the Spirit, *there is life*. Where Jesus is, in body or by the power of the Spirit, *there is light*. The boy's life was restored; amen, hallelujah.

But. We know that is not the end of the story, the sum of our faith. There's tension, even in that victory. The heart of our discipleship, its triumph, is not the miracles we witness but our fidelity to the crucified God to whom they point. A God who prayed that the cup of pain would pass, who suffered unto death, even death on a cross. If our faith stands on good health, on wealth, on the lovely things in life, it will not sustain the thickets of grief.

To affirm that we are called by life to life is not a pollyanna promise of perpetual well being. Yes, God is with us. *But.* Not all of our sons and daughters will be healed. Not all of the scans will be clean. Not all of the pain will disappear. Sometimes the walk home will end in a terrible fright. The promise is not that pain is avoided, it is that life, light, ultimately wins. The tomb could not hold the very God who holds each of us.

A few weeks ago a group from Westminster visited Central Presbyterian in Matanzas, Cuba. Tucked away on a bulletin board was a printout with a picture of a man walking: "Don't ask God to guide your steps," it said "if you aren't willing to move your feet."

The royal official, deep in the thicket of grief, asked. And then he followed the call of life toward a certain tomb where he found a living boy. And in the intermediate walk, the official himself came alive.

It is an incomplete reading that turns to this text and demands a sign in times of turmoil. Perhaps there will be a miracle, that is often the prayer on my lips: the right

doctors, the right drugs, the right person and the right time, a smack of divine intervention. Perhaps the next glass of water you drink will turn to wine on your lips.

Or maybe that's missing the point. Maybe what we see in Cana is that God cares deeply about weddings, about celebrations, about welcomes, and more deeply still about life and death, about our bodies, our grief, our forests and deserts, our mountains and valleys. Maybe the point is that Jesus can be sought in times of crisis, and Jesus' word—even when he is not present physically—can transform lives, guiding us from darkness and death, from thickets and thorns, to renewed belief and new living.

Maybe the point is that Jesus is calling, Jesus' Spirit is guiding, and we are, from our first breaths until our final, being led home.